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The Pursuit Of Happiness

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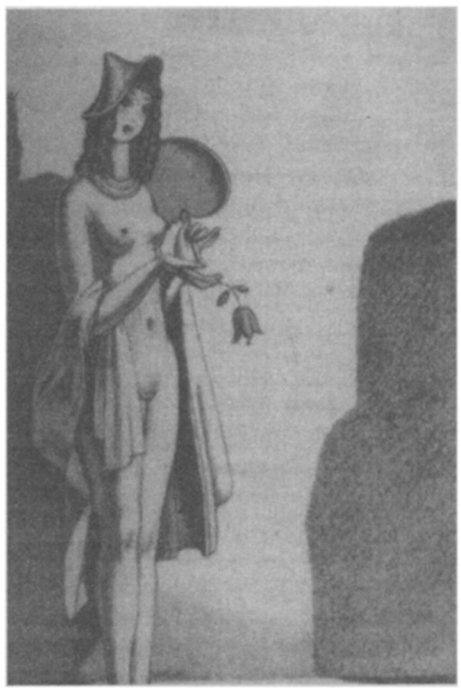

Lesbianism during the second wave of the women's movement.

If a number of the reprinted materials seem somewhat diminished because excerpted from their original settings, if one could quibble with omissions (where is Olga Broumas, for instance, or Marguerite Yourcenar?), the poems and stories which are included nevertheless fare well. Particularly resonant at the end of Sappho's lineage is Jeanette Winterson's evocative and experimental "The Poetics of Sex," with its counterpoint between the hilarious interrogations of a homophobic dork ("WHICH ONE OF YOU IS THE MAN?" or "WHAT DO LESBIANS DO IN BED?") and lyrical descriptions of Sapphic eroticism. Just as intriguing is Winterson's comment in *Art & Lies*, which Reynolds quotes as a sort of ominous summation of Sappho's fate: "Her name has passed into history. Her work has not. Her island is known to millions now, her work is not."

With a capacious and far-flung net, Reynolds never limits herself to the exemplary, as this excerpt from Norman Douglas' *Limericks* (1969) illustrates:

> That naughty old Sappho of
> Greece
> Said: "What I prefer to a piece
> Is to have my pudenda
> Rubbed hard by the enda
> The little pink nose of my niece."
> (pp. 352-353)

Even as *The Sappho Companion* contains multitudes of sometimes silly, sometimes salacious details from the cultural history of this superstar, Reynolds has really done her homework, sending readers back to such scholars as Elyse Blankley, Shari Benstock, Page DuBois, Ruth Vanita, Ellen Greene and Yopie Prins. Contributors to academic journals, convinced that perhaps their mother or an aunt is their sole reader, will understand why it came as a great pleasure for me to find that an accomplished critic in the United Kingdom attributed the growth of her interest in Sappho partly to an essay I had published some years ago in the feminist periodical *Signs*. I mention this to indicate how biased I am in favor of a book that manages to take an extraordinary outpouring of scholarship about Sappho and make it come alive. Anyone who cares about the legendary background of women's living and loving and learning will appreciate this anthology, and look forward to its promised companion volume, a "critical history of Sappho's reception from the Romantic period to the Modern."

The pursuit of happiness

by Jeanne Marecek

In Therapy We Trust: America's Obsession with Self-Fulfillment

by Eva S. Moskowitz. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, 384 pp., $34.95 hardcover.

Eva Moskowitz is alarmed. Americans, she says, are in the grip of an "obsession [that] knows no bounds." All of us, rich and poor, black and white, male and female, straight and gay, are part of a cult that worships the psyche, extols feelings as sacred and seeks salvation in happiness and self-esteem. Moskowitz calls this outlook the "therapeutic gospel." *In Therapy We Trust* is her story of how we came under its spell.

Moskowitz, who was trained as a historian, gleans much of her evidence from popular sources: self-help books and pamphlets, women's magazines, TV talk shows and web sites. She begins with the "mind cure" devised by Phineas Quimby in the 1850s and catalogues the social spheres invaded by the therapeutic gospel: social reform movements, marriage, military, home, social protest movements, mass media and cyberspace. From the erudite psychiatrist William Menninger to the brash Werner Erhard (inventor of *est*) to the trash-talking Ricki Lake, Moskowitz depicts a concerted campaign to inflate the importance of feelings, self-fulfillment and therapy.

Although Moskowitz speaks of a single therapeutic gospel, her rich account describes its seemingly endless variations. Advocates of New Thought believed that positive thinking could cure bodily illness. Freudians preached an austere message of rational self-control and mastery over instinctual impulses. (Consider Freud's modest therapeutic ambition: to replace neurotic misery with everyday unhappiness.) Leaders of encounter groups promoted the instigation of strong emotions, florid displays of feelings and marathons of intimate revelations to strangers. Many of their colleagues looked askance; one eminent psychologist publicly declared the encounter movement a psychic whorehouse.

Not all versions of the therapeutic gospel have preached happiness as goal or universal entitlement. During World War Two, for example, combat psychiatrists warned recruits that fatigue, boredom, homesickness and worry were normal. In treating the many psychic casualties of that war, they aimed not for self-fulfillment—just a speedy return to combat readiness. Women's magazines of the fifties urged housewives to trim their expectations of domestic bliss and accept unhappiness as a normal part of marriage. Like Jell-O, therapeutic gospels seem to have taken the

shape of the cultural container surrounding them.

In Therapy We Trust floods the reader with anecdotes and quotations. Moskowitz dashes energetically across the American cultural landscape, seldom stopping for close analysis or sustained argument. This gets confusing at times: why does the chapter entitled "Home: The unhappy housewife" include lengthy sections on the scandalous conditions of insane asylums, the advent of federal mental health initiatives and the adoption of depth psychology techniques by advertisers? The breezy style sometimes shades into hyperbole. Describing a board game called *Feel Wheel*, Moskowitz argues that "in the seventies, taking the family's emotional temperature took precedence over finding out about the day's activities or accomplishments." How many families played *Feel Wheel*? Or even heard of it? Moskowitz says that IQ "has been displaced by EQ, emotional quotient, or a measure of emotional intelligence." This is simply untrue.

The book is also marred by errors. For example, the official manual of psychiatric diagnoses, *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* is described as fifteen years old and in its second edition; in fact, it is forty years old and in its fourth edition. The long chapter on World War Two fails to mention how psychoanalysts who fled from Europe to the US reshaped our professional and popular ideas about mental life and proper behavior. Moskowitz says that policies favoring outpatient mental health services reflect an emphasis on prevention; however, outpatient services are most notable for providing community-based care that enables people with chronic mental illnesses to live outside institutions. In the space of three pages, both G. Stanley Hall and William James are identified as "the founder of academic psychology in America." Carl Rogers is described as affiliated with a psychodynamic institute, but he adamantly opposed psychodynamic theory. These minor errors do not undermine Moskowitz's argument, but they do undermine the reader's confidence.

In Therapy We Trust portrays mental health professionals as grandiose, calculating and expansionist; as Moskowitz describes it, the advice they give often seems so obtuse that it verges on parody. She implies that during World War Two, professionals exaggerated the suffering of soldiers in order to gain new footholds in the military. Yet by all accounts, the number of psychic casualties during the war was staggering. Moskowitz sees the National Mental Health Act of 1946 as institutionalizing the "therapeutic gospel's core concepts through the creation of new bureaucracies whose main mission was feeling management." Yet the thrust of the act was to reform asylums, whose dismal physical conditions, deprivation and cruelty, as depicted in the 1940s film *The Snake Pit* and other exposés, were widely deplored.

As most readers of *The Women's Review of Books* are aware, psychotherapy and self-help have a special appeal for women in America. Self-help literature is a woman's genre, reflecting women's assigned responsibility for managing relationships and feelings. Mental health professionals selectively refer (and prefer) women (particularly young, white and middle-class women) for psychotherapy. And indeed most consumers of therapy are women. The therapy professions have become increasing identified as female occupations over the past thirty years. In 1970, women received only 25 percent of doctorates awarded in clinical psychology; in 1999, they received more than 70 percent. The past three decades have also seen the rise of distinctive therapeutic approaches that are identified as feminist or women-centered. Along with its new image as women's work, therapy is now seen as a relationship that nurtures and heals.

Moskowitz is careful to note how therapeutic experts drew upon and reaffirmed the prevailing gender stereotypes of their era. She also discusses feminist protests against mental health professions in the early 1970s. However, she stops short of embracing gender as an analytic tool for understanding either the form or the effects of the therapeutic gospel.

The lexicon of official and unofficial diagnoses has been stuffed to bursting in recent decades. Official categories such as Nicotine Use Disorder, Body Dysmorphic Disorder and Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder seem to turn bad habits and bad moods into pathological conditions. The diagnostic terms that swarm through popular psychology vernacular—Recent Wealth Syndrome, Impostor Syndrome, Shopping Addiction, Internet Dependence and ACOA (Adult Child of an Alcoholic)—stretch ever further into everyday life. Moskowitz regards this proliferation of diagnoses and pseudodiagnoses as evidence of the exaggerated value Americans have come to place on feeling good. This view sets her apart from many other observers who worry that as more and more life experiences become pathologized, self-surveillance, self-criticism and shame intensify. As standards for normality grow more exacting, they see pressures for conformity mounting. Of course, these two points of view are not mutually exclusive; they are opposite sides of the same coin. Readers of *In Therapy We Trust* would have benefited had Moskowitz shown how they fit together.

As the term *therapeutic gospel* implies, Moskowitz sees expert influence as chiefly responsible for the spreading of therapeutic culture. But expert influence alone does not explain why therapeutic culture is so entrenched or account for its many twists, turns and transformations. Perhaps because I am a psychologist, I find Moskowitz' mistrust of the mental health professions too sweeping. Without doubt, some therapists are venal and grasping; many self-help fads and fringe therapies are self-indulgent, fraudulent, even wacky. But many therapists shoulder the burden of others' suffering and despair day after day; many engage their clients in moral dialogues and struggle with what constitutes the good life. In recent decades, courageous mental health professionals have spoken out about the sordid secrets of their profession and of society: the prevalence of gender-linked violence and sexual abuse, the persistence of war-related suffering among Vietnam veterans, or sexual relations between male therapists and their female clients. The therapists who appear in this book are not wise, brave, or humane. Not until its final passages does *In Therapy We Trust* acknowledge the reality of psychological suffering, the legitimacy of seeking help and the possible benefit of therapeutic remedies.

In Therapy We Trust raises questions that it does not attempt to answer: what do successive versions of the therapeutic gospel do for people? How do they resonate with cultural preoccupations, anxieties and needs? Which segments of the populace participate in therapeutic culture? What do people do with the systems of meaning offered by therapeutic gospels? In appropriating those meanings to make sense of themselves and their social worlds, how do they talk back to the therapeutic gospel?